

A Case of Imprisonment?  
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Excavations by Hungarian egyptologists on the Theban West Bank in Egypt have been ongoing since the pioneering activity there by László Kákosy. Theban Tomb 65 (Nebamun/Imiseba) in the nobles' cemetery in Western Thebes, after its pharaonic, 'pre-Christian' past in the New Kingdom (also reused later), became part of an anchorite establishment, the so-called Monastery of Cyriacus.<sup>1</sup> The Hungarian Mission led by Tamás A. Bács works on and around the tomb processing both the pharaonic and the Late Antique, Coptic finds. A relatively large number of written Coptic texts have been unearthed on the site, basically on ostraca and papyrus. The first volume presenting this written material was published in October 2013 in the series *Studia Aegyptiaca*.<sup>2</sup>

Both the wider and the immediate environs of TT 65 show intense habitation and activity in the Coptic period, including monastic communities and anchorites on the one hand, and a well-documented town settlement, Jeme, on the other. The wider context of our site, i.e. the Theban West Bank, recently again abounds in newly found Coptic material, and the persons, monasteries, their chronological order and social networks are gradually being unveiled. We hope that the results of the Hungarian Mission at and around TT 65 will also contribute to our knowledge on Western Thebes in the Coptic period.

One almost complete text from the TT 65 material shall be discussed here; it is a personal letter most probably from one monk to the other and therein conflicts in the everyday life find an echo: in this instance a case of locking someone up is mentioned. The details of the ostrakon (restored from three fragments with some parts still missing) and the text with translation shall be presented first:

Inv. No. 99/ID/17a-b, 1997.4

Provenance: TT 65 Secondary Burial F Unit 2 / Layer 1 – Secondary Burial F Unit 2/ Layer 3b

Material: Nile silt fabric

Size: ht. 19,6 cm, w. 17,2 cm, th. 0,9-1,3 cm

Description: Part of a Late Roman Amphora 7 (type B) restored from three fragments.<sup>3</sup> It has 18 lines of text written in black. The text is a letter.

Text:

1. † ϣⲓⲣⲡ ⲙⲉⲛ
2. ⲙⲡⲱⲗⲉ †ⲁⲥⲡⲗⲉ
3. ⲛⲧⲉⲧⲛⲁⲙⲡⲣⲟⲧ̅.ⲛⲥⲟ[
4. ⲙ]ⲛⲧⲉⲕⲏⲛⲧⲥⲟⲛ ⲗⲉ[
5. ⲙⲡⲱⲣⲉ ⲕⲟⲩⲓ ⲁⲕⲟⲗⲗ̅ ⲉⲓⲟⲩⲛ ⲙⲡⲉⲕⲧⲏⲛⲟⲟⲩ ⲛⲁⲓ
6. ⲛ]ⲧⲁⲣⲉⲓⲁⲓⲟⲓⲕⲉⲓ ⲙⲡⲉⲕⲗⲁⲁⲩⲉ ⲛⲁⲕ ⲉⲓⲥ ⲥⲡⲟⲩⲁⲛ ⲛⲓⲙ
7. ⲁⲓⲁⲗⲗ̅ ⲁⲓⲁⲓⲟⲓⲕⲉⲓ ⲛⲛⲉⲕⲛⲟⲩⲃ ⲛⲁⲕ ⲧⲏⲛⲟⲟⲩ ⲟⲩⲣⲱⲙⲉ
8. ⲛⲁⲓ ⲙⲏⲧⲁⲁⲥⲫⲁⲛⲓⲁ ⲛⲧⲁⲁⲡⲟⲗⲟⲓⲓⲩⲉ ⲛⲁⲕ ⲙⲡⲉⲕ
9. †ⲟⲩ ⲛⲓⲟⲗⲟⲕ, ⲙⲉⲧⲁ ⲕⲁⲗⲟⲩ ⲉⲡⲉⲓ ⲙⲡⲉⲓⲉⲱ

<sup>1</sup> cf. Bács 1998 esp. 53, Bács 2000; Bács 2009

<sup>2</sup> HASZNOS 2013

<sup>3</sup> Restored by Gyula Tóth, conservator.

10. ΘΑΡΡΕΙ ΝΤΗΝΟΟΥΣΟΥ ΝΑΚ ΖΙΤΗ ΡΩΜΕ
11. ΑΛΛΑ ΠΑΝΤΩΣ ΣΧΕΔΟΝ ΗΠΑΤΚΩΨ ΤΒΛΧ
12. ΤΗΝΟΟΥ ΠΡΩΜΕ ΕΙΣ ΠΛΟΓΟΣ ΗΠΝΟΥΤΕ Ν  
ΤΟΟΤΩ
13. ΨΑΝΤΑΑΠΟΚΑΘΙΣΤΑ ΗΜΟΩ ΕΠΕΩ
14. ΜΑ ΠΑΝΤΩΣ ΕΝΕΑΚΣΖΑΙ ΝΑΙ
15. ΖΑΘΗ ΗΠΑΤΚΑΜΑΖΤΕ ΗΠΡΩ[ΜΕ]
16. ΝΕΚΝΑΖΕ ΕΡΟΣ ΔΙΑΠΟΛΟΓΙΖΕ
17. ΝΑΚ ΑΥΩ ΟΝ ΤΕΚ ΜΕΙΣ[
18. ΕΤΣΖΑΙ Ε[

Translation:

1. Now, before
2. all things, I warmly greet
3. your eminence
4. and your brotherhood (...)
5. the young boy, you closed him in. You did not send to me
6. after I had looked after your property whole-heartedly for you.
7. I did that and I looked after your money for you; send a man
8. to me with my guarantee, and I will account for
9. your five *solidi* to you to (your) satisfaction, for I did not
10. dare to send them (i.e. the coins) to you by anyone.
11. But quite surely you have not yet read the ostrakon.
12. Send the man with 'the word of God'<sup>4</sup> with him
13. until I put him back to
14. his place. Surely, if you had written to me
15. before you had taken the man,
16. you would have found that I have accounted
17. (for your money) to you, and also your (...).
18. I, who am writing (...)

Notes:

Line 3: The noun here is probably **ΛΑΜΠΡΟΤΗΣ** (Greek **λαμπρότης**) "brightness, glory, distinction, eminence; (as honorific style of address)" (LAMPE, 792a), the end of this word might be abbreviated under the horizontal line or its **Η** is misspelt by **Ν** in which case the noun is written in full and the next word starts with an **Ο**.

Line 8: read **ΑΣΦΑΛΙΑ** (Greek **ἀσφαλεία**) instead of **ΑΣΦΑΝΙΑ**. Alternative translations might be 'undertaking/contract', cf. P.Mon.Epiph. 85.

Line 9: **μετὰ καλῶ** cf. P.Mon.Epiph. 96, 142, 151, 310, 436

<sup>4</sup> The **ΛΟΓΟΣ ΗΠΝΟΥΤΕ** 'the word of God' is a document with a promissory or protective declaration, a kind of guarantee (usually official) (WINLOCK-CRUM 1926, 176/1 fn.) given to somebody who would be responsible for illegally leaving his dwelling place – because of not paying his taxes, etc. – so that he can return to his place without punishment, or it is simply a receipt for taxes paid (WINLOCK-CRUM 1926, 177). It could be issued for example by the employer or a monastic superior (TILL 1939, 71-147.). In Greek documents the same phenomenon is evidenced, here the protective document is called **λόγος ἀσυλίας** "letter of asylum" which was, again, given by some authority and made it possible for a fugitive to leave his asylum – usually a church where he escaped to – without being imprisoned (BAGNALL – PALME 1996, pp. 2-3.). It is important to note that the type of document was introduced by Justinian, forms a central part of Edict 13 and was put in force in 539, addressed to Egypt (BAGNALL – PALME 1996, p. 2.) – so it gives us a *terminus post quem*.

The question as to who, why and where is locked up, confined, or imprisoned (line 5) naturally arises here. Very close parallels to this text are text 163, 5ff and text 166, 10 (also the verb  $\omega\lambda$  is employed) in the Monastery of Epiphanius.<sup>5</sup> Similarly to our letter where a young boy is closed in, here youths/young children are mentioned.

Winlock and Crum discuss the phenomenon of intervention in writing for prisoners: the church, and apparently also monastic communities, were expected to strive for the redemption of prisoners as a form of benevolence. That concerns mostly prisoners of war. In the letters found at the Monastery of Epiphanius the persons locked up and mentioned are never prisoners of war, but persons locked up for debts or the like, and here let me quote Crum himself: "Those who appeal for such help as venerated ascetes might render do not often tell us the grounds of their imprisonment, but we may suppose that debt, fiscal or private, would be the most frequent cause, together with neglect of other obligations."<sup>6</sup> Also in the collection of the *Apophthegmata Patrum*, and in Shenoute texts we find the holy men helping and interceding for the release of prisoners, whereas St. Antony seems to have disapproved of this practice.<sup>7</sup> In the Monastery of Epiphanius material Epiphanius himself is addressed by the local magistrates for such help (text 163).

In the case of the letter found at TT 65 and here presented, debt seems to be the cause, as in lines 7–10 writer says: "send a man to me with my guarantee, and I will account for your five solidi to you to (your) satisfaction, for I did not dare to send them (i.e. the coins) to you by anyone." So possibly, writer failed to return addressee's money and things after looking after them, addressee in turn locked someone up. This delay on writer's part, however, might have been unintentional and due to his fear of losing those things. Or not. It is naturally rather hard to judge from our distance. What is for certain is that 'confinements' did take place and in the monasteries it might have happened in separate 'lock-ups' or the monk's own cell.<sup>8</sup>

Also referring to 'imprisonment' although with a different expression is an unfortunately incomplete letter from TT 65 (No 10) where the 'issue of imprisonment'  $\Phi\omega\beta \bar{\nu}\alpha\iota\chi\mu\alpha\lambda\omega[\sigma\iota\alpha$  is referred to; in a neighbouring tomb (TT 85) an expression based on that same loan-word is used (rather than the verb  $\omega\lambda$  seen in our text), also in the context of debt or the like, rather than 'prisoner of war' and here a man is threatened that his sons will be taken away ( $\chi\iota\eta\epsilon\varrho\omega\eta\epsilon \bar{\nu}\alpha\iota\chi\mu\alpha\lambda\omega\tau\omicron\varsigma$ ) for his debts, TT 85/117;<sup>9</sup> also ST 374. These instances (as also the above mentioned Epiphanius Monastery letters and the present text) raise the interesting question as to whether it is always the children or young ones who are locked up for somebody's debts if he or she has children.

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<sup>5</sup> CRUM – EVELYN-WHITE 1926, texts 163 and 166

<sup>6</sup> WINLOCK – CRUM 1926, 175

<sup>7</sup> WINLOCK – CRUM 1926, 176/fn.4

<sup>8</sup> WINLOCK – CRUM 1926, 176/fn.13

<sup>9</sup> BEHLMER 2007, 166

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